LEARNING THE REAL:
REALISM AND THE PEDAGOGY OF ENCOUNTER

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The line demarcating realism from its antagonists generally stands for a judgement regarding the otherness of a given 'object' or class of objects over against the human mind. Thus, to be a realist regarding mathematical objects is to hold that those objects are not dependent simply upon human construction but have, as one theorist puts it, both 'existence' and 'mind-independence'[1]. It is the breadth of this characterisation that makes 'realism' such a shifty term in contemporary philosophy capable of being applied to everything from macroscopic things to moral values. For the purposes of this paper I am concerned with one specific realism-antirealism debate: realism regarding 'substantial form'. Although I shall be very specific at times regarding what I mean by form I also intend my comments here to be broadly applicable to various notions of form be they Aristotelian, Platonic or otherwise. In order to get an initial sense of the issue being debated I recall Aquinas' quite conventional statement:

> Et quia illud, per quod res constituitur in proprio genere vel specie, est hoc quod significatur per diffinitionem indicantem quid est res, inde est quod nomen essentiae a philosophis in nomen quiditatis mutatur. Et hoc est quod philosophus frequenter nominat quod quid erat esse, id est hoc per quod aliquid habet esse quid. Dicitur etiam forma[2].

The alternative terms that Aquinas notes here ('form', 'essence', 'quiddity') all have to do with differentiating and defining each thing in its very specificity. Thus, to uphold the reality of substantial form is partially to uphold the reality of difference, of particularity. It is also, however, to uphold the coherence of each thing (as its substantial form gives a robust *ratio* or principle of existence) on the one hand and on the other the communality between things as they share in a layered network of species and genera (hence the term 'universal').

Antagonists to the reality of this notion of form have tended to cluster around denials of one or more of these three functions. Thus one kind of rejection (often called 'monism' or 'reductionism') attempts to reject form's capacity for differentiation by reducing existence to a single principle[3]. Another refuses the idea that any extant being has a core essence by arguing that 'things' should be seen rather as aggregates of various properties without any

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[1] ALEXANDER MILLER, *Realism and Anti-Realism*, in «The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language», eds. ERNEST LEPORE, BARRY C. SMITH, Oxford 2006, p. 987.

[2] *De ente et essentia*, cap. I

[3] Whilst it is common to chide the so-called Milesian School for naïve variants of this position, much contemporary scientific reductionism is not far-removed. Arguments against form from Darwinian evolution, for example, tend to blend this kind of argument with the next as they suggest that the current arrangements seen in various organisms manifest an underlying unguided process of 'quality reconfiguration' (i.e., mutation governed by natural selection). See ALEX ROSENBERG, *Darwinian Reductionism*, Chicago 2006. The so called monism of neo-platonism does not fit easily into this category given their emphasis upon upholding the reality of difference in the quest for unity. See STEPHEN GERSH, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena,* Leiden 1978, pp. 61ss.

coherent organising principle of existence[4]. The final (and perhaps most famous) denial-nominalism-has held that there are not common essences but only individual beings and that any shared concept covering multiple individuals is given by an act of the human mind alone[5]. These objections are not mutually exclusive and indeed tend to amalgamate in diverse combinations[6].

Whilst my purpose in the present essay is to support realism, I do not intend to do so by offering a new argument for realism, but rather by claiming that realists must learn to argue in a new fashion. To introduce this purpose, I need to say something about the standard understanding of the debate between realists and anti-realists. Commentators tend to see (both historical and contemporary) debates about realism as ongoing contests between two different theoretical possibilities[7]. The task, that is, is to find out which theory offers 1. a more adequate (i.e. compelling) and 2. a more coherent account of reality. The nominalist, for example, can argue against the adequacy of realism by finding a feature of reality which seems to be occluded by or contrary to realism, but fitted to nominalism. Ockham claims in this vein that the realist would foolishly have to hold that the destruction of even a single individual would only be able to happen by the destruction of the whole species[8]. The nominalist can secondly argue against realism by showing that it is internally incoherent or logically flawed in another fashion. The most famous argument of this type involves the claim that realism entails vicious infinite regress[9].

Both of these types of argument tend to share the assumption that the confrontation between realism and anti-realism is a feud between competing theories. The task is thus to decide which approach offers a better *account* of reality. It is this assumption that I wish to contest in the present essay. Whilst I do not wish to argue that these issues are non-theoretical[10] nor that arguments regarding adequacy or coherence are out of place, I do intend to reject as facile the view that this is primarily (or exclusively) a contest between alternative accounts of reality. As I shall argue to see the matter in this way is not merely to fail to grasp the true nature of the divergence, but also to adopt an impoverished approach towards persuading one's interlocutor.

Arguments of the type just described attempt to dispel ignorance in a given domain, but if

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[4] It was this aspect of substantial form that the early-modern atomists worked so vigorously to reject in their ever growing attempts to see objects as bundles of accidental qualities. Thus Boyle asserts: «An aggregate or convention of qualities is enough to make the portion of matter it is found in what it is». (*The Origin and Form of Qualities*, I.vii); See also LOCKE, *Essay Concerning Human Uniderstanding* III.vi; PETER ALEXANDER, *Ideas, qualities and corpuscles*, Cambridge 1985.

[5] Thus Ockham: «Et ideo simpliciter concedendum est, quod nullum universale est substantia, qualiter cumque consideretur. Sed quodlibet universale est intentio animae [...]» (*Summa Logicae*, I.15). As Maritain comments: «On peut noter que la plupart des philosophes "modernes" [...] sont plus ou moins profondément et plus ou moins consciemment teintés de nominalisme». *Éléments de Philosophie I* , Paris 1921, p. 113.

[6] On the history of how any one of these objections tends to slip into the others see: ROBERT PASNAU, *Metaphysical themes 1274-1671*, Oxford 2011.

[7] See for example: WILLIAM J. COURTENAY, *Ockham and Ockhamism*, Leiden 2008; DAVID M. ARMSTRONG, *Nominalism and Realism*, Cambridge 1978.

[8] *Summa Logicae*, I.15

[9] See FRANCIS HERBERT BRADLEY, *Appearance and Reality,* London 1893; WILLIAM F. VALLICELLA, *Relations, Monism, and the Vindication of Bradley's Regress*, in «Dialectica», 56 (2002), pp. 3-35. In addition to these two types of arguments, there are also more methodological (metametaphysical) disputes to be had regarding how one goes about adjudicating between theories as a whole. Is one to accept, for example, Ockham's principle of simplicity as a proper judge of the superior theory or not? DAVID CHALMERS, DAVID MANLEY, and RYAN WASSERMAN (eds), *Metametaphysics*, Oxford 2009.

[10] I am of course using 'theory' here in the modern sense and not in the richer and more amenable ancient sense of θεωρία.

one's antagonist is to be convinced there must be some shared convictions from the outset. I will say something more about the nature of this commonality below. For now I wish to pay attention to the assumptions regarding the nature of the ignorance at work in the types of arguments just described.

In both types of argument, the assumption is that one's interlocutor has a roughly shared experience of reality. For example, the adequacy argument that realism is questionable because it entails the multiple localisation of objects assumes that one's interlocutor shares one's own experience of a world in which objects do not multiply-locate and therefore will find the notion of an object that does so rather problematic. Similarly, the realist who argues that the 'bundle of qualities' notion of objects[11] is incoherent on the grounds that any change whatsoever will change the identity of the object assumes that her interlocutor experiences objects which seem to change in some respects and do not immediately thereby become different objects. This way of conducting the debate assumes that all of the various disputants share a fairly monolithic experiential base. Indeed, at times this shared base is even enforced as normative with phrases such as «we now know that science tells us [...]» with the implication that it is quite irresponsible not to share the given experiential intuition.

In addition to assuming a shared evidential base, this approach also assumes a fairly standard rational consciousness which will operate in a uniform fashion assuming it is not impaired or behaving irresponsibly. Any properly functioning mind, in other words, given a minimal set of entry conditions (e.g., not being drunk or blind) should experience the given items in the world in roughly the same fashion.

This vision of the debate thus locates the cause of the dispute (i.e., 'the reason that we disagree') in a more superficial locus, namely in the fact that different participants draw different conclusions from this body of shared data. Blame for the divergence thus tends to rest upon the other party's failure to grasp the proper way that the connections that flow from that evidence must be constructed. For the anti-realist, the realist is not defective in their capacity to encounter reality, but is rather simply overly-vigorous in their positing of exotic entities. The fault, in other words, is in how we collate ideas, not in how we encounter things[12]. This approach to argument is quite typical for modern philosophical discourse. It is also, I suggest, deeply inappropriate for the dispute under consideration here.

I. I begin with a parable:

> A traveller is ambling along a small country lane when around a corner she spots a mason constructing a garden wall. As she approaches, she notices something rather peculiar about the materials being used. Rather than stones or bricks, the man is layering great lofty books (and mostly works of Russian fiction given their heft) one upon another albeit in a typical bricking pattern with mortar in between. Just as he is about to set an early edition of *Doctor Zhivago* into place, the wayfarer intervenes protesting at his damaging such a fine work of literature.
> Her first assumption is that the problem is a failure to value fine art. Her attempt, however, to defend this value falls flat. It is then that she notices certain looks of incomprehension upon the man's face at words such as 'literature', 'fiction' and 'read'. It gradually becomes apparent that the man does not value these books for their contents for the straightforward reason that he does not, in fact, grasp the significance of the term 'book' at all. The woman's astonishment at this already quite astonishing episode only grows when she finds that her attempts to explain the nature of a book are met not with acknowledgment and understanding but rather with a

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[11] MICHAEL J. LOUX, *Metaphysics*, Oxford 2006, p. 47.

[12] The historical developments by which this approach to argument came to dominate are discussed in CHARLES TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge 1989, chs. 7-12; SAMUEL KIMBRIEL, *Friendship as Sacred Knowing*, New York 2014, (forthcoming), ch. 1.

robust strain of incredulity. «You mean to say that you think that these tiny squiggles contain within themselves a complete world, filled with cafes, horses and soldiers?» he protests. The traveller is perplexed, but resolves to do her best to address the confusion. It is not, she says, that the world is inside the book, but rather that the squiggles are words telling a story about the world. At this, the mason again objects, laughing at the idea of small patches of ink making sounds and sentences, adding «Not even our madmen say such nonsense».

More than a little hurt, the traveller settles on a demonstration, opening to a page and beginning to read, «Long ago, before the railway came to Khodatskoe [...]». The man looks initially intrigued but the old look of incredulity quickly returns. Afore long he interrupts: «You are an adept conjurer; I will give you that. It seemed for a moment that you were giving magic to the black lines allowing them to speak through your mouth but of course any child with a good imagination and a bit of acting could repeat the trick».

I wish to suggest that this situation has a number of important parallels to the standoff between realists and antirealists. Both the walker and the mason seem to be seeing, touching and smelling the same lump of matter involving the same rectangular dimensions, the same set of bound leaves with the same wavy lines on each. The problem, however, is that the two parties disagree about what this thing is, with one holding it to be a book and the other something closer to a brick. Similarly, the realist and anti-realist apparently find themselves stumbling about the same material world made up of poplars, pearls and pianos yet with each taking themselves to be encountering quite different 'things' with one seeing (however partially) coherent essences in diverse arrangements uniting various objects one to another in genera and species, and with the other instead seeing, for example, only qualities variably arranged.

It is here that the parable begins to have something to teach. Notice that within the parable, the reality of the given object under dispute is only accessible through a second (though not *secondary*) reality, namely the reality of the human being. The more abstract language of contemporary philosophical discourse lends itself to the forgetting of the human doing the enquiring but this is an impossibility within the literary frame. In the story, it is evident that each character's understanding of the given object is embedded within and undergirded by a history of interaction with that object. The object is not simply a theoretical slot in each person's philosophical system, but a thing in reality that is to be encountered. In this regard the understanding that each person has of the reality is embedded within (and very nearly identical with) the way that that person allows the reality of their own soul and body to press up against the reality of the book-shaped object. In this sense, the use of an object (how one interacts with it) *is* one's understanding of it. Thus, for example, the wayfarer's first awareness of disagreement in the above case comes precisely in the recognition that the mason *uses* the object in an exotic or even inappropriate fashion.

What, then, is the conclusion to be drawn from this analysis? Is it, in a relativist vein, that there are simply various histories and patterns of interaction with objects that lead to diverse and often incompatible understandings of and interactions with the given item without any chance for adjudication? Perhaps in this case the traveller and mason should simply be encouraged to agree on a minimalist definition of the object (say 'rectangular' and 'openable') and leave more contentious matters such as 'word-containing' and 'readable' aside.

Whilst such resignation to relativism is all too often seen as inevitable when one begins to speak of embodied understanding, it is evident in the present case that this is not the only options open to our wayfarer. Indeed, to focus upon this possibility is to ignore the most obvious action, namely for the traveller to spend a few brief weeks showing the mason how she herself sees the significance of various squiggles in their diverse combinations. The best way, that is, for the mason to be convinced of the nature of bookness is for him to come to practice for himself the skill of reading, a practice which can be learned through the gentle exemplification of the given skill by the expert (in this case, the literate traveller). All of the intended

results of the traveller's earlier arguments, even if successful, would appear paltry in comparison to the strength of the conviction regarding the nature of bookness that the mason would have after reading his first paragraph for himself. Indeed, this point is even deeper than it initially appears for it is almost certainly the case that even the traveller's own convictions regarding the nature of a book are held precisely as aspects of a broader history of interaction with books centred upon the activity of reading.

II. Proponents of realism suffer in the engagement with those who wish to deny the reality of form from having misdiagnosed the nature of the disagreement. As I articulated it above, both sides of the debate share the sense that what divides them is how they go about constructing their accounts of reality on the basis of a broadly shared way of experiencing reality on the one hand and a resulting shared set of experiential data on the other. The current mode of discourse belies a false belief that the disagreement arises simply from sloppy bookkeeping or inattention. Rather, in keeping with the parable from the previous section, I wish to suggest here that the division between realists and antirealists is rather a matter of varying degrees of 'perceptual expertise', expertise parallel to that needed to interact with a book appropriately.

If philosophy is to do its job well it must both be directed toward a purpose that is fitting for humans and essentially consist of activities that are accomplishable by humans. Drawing upon this point, I would like to suggest that to see realism as an 'account of reality that involves universals' is to misunderstand its true character and importance by too narrowly constraining philosophy to one aspect of its broader activity. It is true that one part of philosophy's task is to articulate something about its discoveries but if one is to identify this task with the telos of human philosophy one would have to make the case that 'having accounts' is on its own a good for human beings. One possible way of arguing for this claim would be to say that account constructing is, to use Aristotle's language, 'an activity of soul involving virtue'. As Aristotle makes clear, however, if one is to see a given activity as good for humans 'on its own' (i.e., not for the sake of something else) one must not merely show that the activity involves virtue but that it is the activity towards which virtue essentially aims and is complete in itself[13]. This is a difficult argument to make for the present case. One possibility would be to say, following Plato and Aristotle, that the truth is intrinsically good and therefore to possess an account of the truth is a human good. The problem here is that, for both philosophers, the fitting activity with regard to the intrinsic good of truth cannot essentially consist in constructing *accounts* of the truth, but rather must be seen as *residing with the truth* rightly[14].

This final distinction is very near to the claim that I would like to make here. I suggest that realism should not primarily be seen as an account regarding reality, but rather as a sophisticated way of interacting with reality. In this regard the real divergence between realism and antirealism is not between two different ways of processing a shared experience of reality, but rather between two different ways of approaching – and consequently experiencing – reality.

In general, statements of this kind tend to make people nervous. Is not to speak of 'different ways of approaching reality' to give up our capacity to adjudicate between different truth claims and therefore to open the door to relativism? If different people experience reality differently, how are we to judge which way of experiencing is the right one?

Here, the parallel with the dispute about books reappears. It would be absurdly defeatist to conclude that just because someone uses a book differently that there is not, in fact, a right

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13 *Ethica Nichomachea*, 1098a1-20.

14 Plato's critique of writing in the last half of *Phaedrus* is particularly relevant. *Theaetetus*, 176a5-c5; *Ethica Nichomachea*, 1177a12-1179b32. This is a common point, but for an extended treatment of it see LLOYD P. GERSON, *Ancient Epistemology,* Cambridge 2009.

(or at least 'better') way to use a book. Likewise, I suggest that it is similarly absurd to conclude that because not every person is able to perceive the reality of form, that there is not, in fact, something there to be perceived. It is, of course, the case that many anti-realists see form as an exotic doctrine invoking a kind of magical essence for which one has no evidence[15]. But of course, our mason also perceives the traveller's claims regarding books as being spooky in precisely this fashion. The question, in this regard, is not whether the mason's use is somehow 'wrong' – books do have physical dimensions that can be more or less effectively employed in his fashion (though the wall may prove rather temporary) – but whether the mason's actions fail to appreciate just how deep the given object is? As I argued above, the key task at the moment of disagreement of this kind is not to convince the other party of a theoretical statement regarding what a book (or an 'object') is, but rather to show them how to interact with the object differently. It is, the very act of interacting with that object differently – i.e., through reading – that convinces the mason that the object is not as shallow as he thought but has previously unimaginable depths.

The person who denies realism, in this sense, should not be seen, I suggest, as an 'enemy combatant' vying for an alternative reading of a neutral body of evidence, but rather more like a novice who has not yet learned the depths of the things in front of her. And of course, the fitting response for this latter issue is rather different than that currently being undertaken in relation to the former.

III. The critical question, then, is how can a person learn to perceive the depths of a thing when she is acclimated simply to gliding along on the surface? To answer this question, I wish to return to restate a point made in section I in another fashion. I noted there that one of the real advantages of the literary frame is that it forces one ever to remember the place of the human being within the process of knowing. The question of 'bookness' is not simply an issue of sorting out various conceptual connections, but is rather bound up with the specific histories and patterns of interaction of the people involved. Whilst it may be a truism to say that all philosophy that humans do is human philosophy, even a truism can trip one's foot if one fails to attend to it appropriately.

The point is relevant in the present case. The common assumption that the debate proceeds on top of a 'neutral body of experience' fails to recall just how much of a human and messy matter experience actually is. A growing literature in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science, for example, does much to remind us of what we never should have forgotten, namely that we do not simply perceive what is in front of our faces, but rather that perception is a kind of skill by which we slowly learn to attend to what is present[16]. Thus I could wander by Giorgione's *Tempesta* countless times without recognising its revolutionary features until my wife *helps me to see* what has been before my face all along, at which point I come to be able to appreciate its depth and beauty for myself in a new fashion. I learn the expertise of *Tempesta*-reading thusly.

It is for these kinds of reasons that defenders of realism, I suggest, must be cautious about speaking too energetically about the reality of form *in the world*, without first remembering the reality of form *in the human person*. The real, that is, is only disclosed to the human because she is herself something real[17]. I recall here Maritain's emphasis in the first chapter of *Approches de*

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[15] Locke's famous charge against substance as «a supposition of he knows not what» is not far off. See *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II.xxiii, III.vi.

[16] See Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, Cambridge 1993; Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life,* Cambridge MA 2010; Alva Noë, *Action in Perception,* Cambridge 2004; Alva Noë, *Varieties of Presence,* Cambridge MA 2012.

[17] I think here of Aquinas's lengthy depiction of the person as the 'form open to forms' in *ST* I.75, 77-9.

Dieu upon an intuition of *la solidité de l'existence* knit into being human[18]. As he suggests, ancient science simply assumed this intuition and perpetually sought to find ways to allow that solid existence of humanness to come into interaction with the broader depths of reality in a fashion that would disclose the most important rudiments of existence. The act of disclosure in this sense should be seen as an interaction between two particular determined realities which (as with the interaction between a horse and rider or a painter and his materials) can proceed more or less successfully. The act of knowing form is thus, I suggest, an expertise that can be learned.

Indeed, in an important sense it *must* be learned for, as Aquinas claims, whilst God and some angels can understand the fullness of a thing on first apprehension, humans must work their way to full understanding. As he makes clear, the process of coming to deeper understanding for humans involves an initial apprehension – albeit often in a partial and poorly fashioned manner – which then allows the human to start the hard work of pursuing the depths of insight hidden within[19]. Aquinas's tendency to parse the etymology of *intellectus* as *intus legere* («De Veritate» I.12c) is helpful here for whilst no act of the intellect can proceed without an initial act of apprehension (*intellectus*) the capacity for apprehension must be deepened through the training of the mind, just as one must learn how to read.

It is in considering how this training might proceed that Pierre Hadot's careful analyses of ancient philosophical programme's of education (παιδεία) are of such use[20]. As Hadot shows, the ancient philosophical schools had an astonishing sensitivity to the process that a soul must go through in order to be sensitive to the very realities in front of its face. Accordingly, they constructed the process of education in such a way that the soul might gradually be led into habits of intellectual insight by which it might encounter reality ever more deeply. There was, of course, a central place afforded to dialectical argument in this training (hence my earlier openness to preserving a place for arguments of adequacy and coherence) but these arguments were not focused simply upon justifying one account over another, but rather upon training a given soul to be sensitive to those things regarding which it had previously been dull.

The most pressing task, in this regard, for the proponents of realism is to come to consider just how it is that such sensitivities might be fostered. The urgency of this task does not, furthermore, arise simply for the sake of persuading others. The appreciation of the exotic otherness of extant things is an achievement, and not an easy one. Whilst the soul is potentially a profoundly sensitive thing, it seems in this life all too frequently to be mired in a kind of torpor by which it ruminates upon its own ruminations without any deep exposure to depths of reality. There is a strong sense in which, amidst the enthusiasm to offer arguments from neutral evidence that has of late characterised realism's approach to this debate, the essential activity of nurturing such sensitivity in our own souls has also been too much neglected. Realism has misspoken its own name, understanding its purpose to lie in the generation and justification of accounts of reality[21]. Its true purpose lies rather in its ability gently to foster the soul's power to encounter reality into its maturity.

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[18] Jacques Maritain, *Approches de Dieu*, Paris, 1953, p. 15.; W. Norris Clarke, *The Self as Source of Meaning in Metaphysics*, in «Review of Metaphysics», 21 (1968), pp. 597-614.

[19] *ST* I.85.5c

[20] Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris 1981; Pierre Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique*, Paris 1995.

[21] Presumably, realism accepted these terms of debate out of the hope of persuading its antagonists. But the bargain was foolish for one cannot teach someone to read by giving up on the task of reading. If the mason is unwilling to learn how to read, the guilt of his ignorance of books must rest upon his own head.